

# 100,000 wreaths headed to Arlington National Cemetery

PORTLAND, Maine — Twenty years ago, wreath company owner Morrill Worcester and a dozen other people laid 5,000 wreaths on headstones at Arlington National Cemetery. It was Worcester's way of giving thanks to the nation's veterans with leftover unsold wreaths.

This year, Worcester has arranged for up to 100,000 wreaths to be placed on grave sites at the military cemetery Dec. 10 in his biggest wreath-laying undertaking yet.

A convoy of more than 20 trucks left Worcester Wreath Co. in the eastern Maine town of Harrington on Sunday to begin the six-day journey to the cemetery in Arlington, Va., outside Washington, the final resting place for hundreds of thousands of veterans and a tourist site that draws 4 million visitors a year. Along the way, there will be ceremonies at schools, veterans' homes and in communities in Maine, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland.

Worcester never expected the wreath-laying effort to grow from a single tractor-trailer carrying a few thousand wreaths to 84 big rigs delivering wreaths to Arlington and hundreds of locations. Besides the Arlington ceremony, his Wreaths Across America organization has also organized more than 700 other ceremonies at veterans' cemeteries and monuments across the country and overseas involving 225,000 wreaths.

"We haven't really tried to push it; it's really just grown on its own," Worcester said. "We have a hard time keeping up with it."

Worcester, who has never served in the military, came up with the idea of a wreath-laying ceremony 20 years ago when he found himself with an extra 5,000 wreaths in December, too late to bring to market. He decided upon Arlington National Cemetery, which he had visited as a child.

After that first year, Worcester continued donating wreaths and holding ceremonies at the cemetery. The event remained relatively small with little fanfare until a photo, showing thousands of green wreaths with red ribbons nestled against headstones on a snow-covered ground, made its way around the Internet about five years ago.

After that, Worcester got thousands of emails and letters from people wanting to

donate, and inquiries from others asking how they could hold wreath-laying ceremonies of their own to pay tribute to those who have served in the military. So he and his wife founded the nonprofit Wreaths Across America to take in donations and organize hundreds of wreath-laying ceremonies at veterans' cemeteries.

Wreaths Across America put 24,000 wreaths on Arlington headstones last year, and initially hoped to put them on virtually all 220,000 headstones this year. That initiative fell short, but Worcester said he's still pleased that they'll be able to put out 100,000 of the laurels.

Of the 325,000 wreaths in all of this year's ceremonies, Worcester is donating 25,000. His company makes the rest, but they are paid for through donations from groups and individuals and through corporate sponsorships.

The growth of the event doesn't surprise Joanne Patton of Hamilton, Mass., the daughter-in-law of World War II Gen. George S. Patton and the widow of Patton's son, Maj. Gen. George S. Patton IV, who is buried in Arlington.

On Monday, Patton will receive one of Worcester's wreaths in a ceremony in Topsfield, Mass., which she will then lay on a tank in Patton Park in Hamilton, Mass. She has participated in past Wreaths Across America events as well.

"It's an amazing expression of honoring the spirit of service," she said.

Figuring out the logistics of resting so many wreaths at Arlington National Cemetery was complex enough when there were only 5,000 to worry about, said Wayne Hanson, who is in charge of coordinating the ceremony at Arlington. If the weather is nice, Hanson expects more than 10,000 people to participate in Saturday's event.

Hanson is optimistic that some year soon all the Arlington headstones will have wreaths placed on them for the ceremony.

"We can work toward doing the whole cemetery for our 25th anniversary," he said.